

Introduction

In a final letter addressed to the Prime Minister of Australia at the end of his tenure as Chief of Naval Staff (CNS) of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Admiral Sir Louis Hamilton, KCB, DSO, RN used the following quote to make a point:

A navy does not fall from the clouds etc

Admiral Hamilton's point was that it takes time to create a naval service – simply ordering one in to existence and supplying it with ships will not achieve the desired result. At the time he was struggling with Government edict that the budget for Defence was to be evenly divided amongst the three services, a course of action which, if followed, would have meant that most of the Australian navy would have had to be paid off into reserve.

But there is another interpretation which can be placed on the quotation: one needs skilled and dedicated people, properly trained and well led, to effectively operate a navy. There must be an accepted way of doing things based on experience and that somewhat-devalued word these days – tradition. In times of stress and danger, the proper operation of a ship requires every man to perform his - and these days every woman her- allotted function. When circumstances pass beyond those trained for, Navy people need to fall back on tradition to work out the proper responses. If the tradition inculcated is to down tools and wait for someone with a better idea to come along, then that is what will happen.

Created as the Commonwealth Naval Forces on 1 March 1901 following Federation of the Australian colonies, the Australian navy inherited the traditions of the Royal Navy (RN) which had, as the

slogan goes 'discovered, developed and protected' Australia since 1770. Some of these traditions were irrelevant to the new navy but others were extremely important. One such was the Nelsonian adage that 'No Captain can do wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy'. Translated into the usage of the 20th Century, this meant that attack was the best form of defence: while it was still possible to do so, one was expected to keep attacking. One non-Nelsonian ethos inculcated into the new navy was that Australians could out-perform the British at anything. While Australians may now more readily associate this idea with their national sporting teams, it has had a long and honourable history in the RAN.

While the new navy gradually developed its own capabilities of training, leadership, organisation and administration, in its formative years many of the senior positions were held by officers of the RN seconded to Australia, which effectively shaped the RAN as 'a navy within a navy'. This was already beginning to change when World War 2 broke out and the process was accelerated, particularly during the Pacific War, when the RAN came into close administrative, operational and logistic contact with the United States Navy (USN). In June 1944, the first officer trained at the RAN College took command of the Australian Squadron in which most of the commanding officers were also Australian. Command of the Australian navy passed to an RAN officer on 24 February 1948, an achievement that had taken only 35 years from the entry of the first class into the Royal Australian Naval College. The RAN had certainly not 'dropped from the skies', but it had been created in a remarkably short time, for which much credit must go those RN officers who had charted its course and watched over its professional, technical and ethical development.

Over this period of 48 years, as this book will demonstrate, the RAN had generated a number of its own traditions – for steadfastness, for excellence and for gallantry. These became particularly important during World War 2 when the RAN expanded from little more than 5,000 men and a handful of ships in September 1939 to almost 40,000 men and women and over 300 ships at its peak strength in 1945. The vast majority of the additional navy people were entered from civilian life, but they performed no less honourably than the permanent service people they served alongside and they displayed the same distinctive characteristics which the RAN had made its own.

From 1948 the RAN and its responsibilities have evolved and continue to do so. New equipment entering service in the 1950s had a clear British origin in design and function, but the 1960s saw a shift to a more independent attitude towards the source of material for the RAN. In July 1965 the Australian navy replaced the British White Ensign as its distinguishing flag with its own design having the Southern Cross in place of the cross of St. George. This Australian White Ensign was an assertion of maturity and confidence, and not just in naval heraldry. Under it, RAN units fought alongside the US and the forces of the Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnamese war, operating outside the RN ‘umbrella’ for the first time.

The 1970s saw the accelerated purchase of equipment from US sources, and the development of Australian specialist training because of the declining relevance of British syllabi and methods. Integration with USN modes of warfare became more important and led to the development of a relationship of great mutual confidence on both sides, one which has seen the once-unthinkable situation of US forces controlled by RAN officers during the two Gulf Wars and the operations which continue to safeguard Iraqi

security and sovereignty. It might be said that while the traditions of steadfastness, excellence and gallantry have been nurtured, it is not only the British that RAN personnel are now convinced they can out-perform.

A study of honours and awards is, of course, not the only yardstick by which the Australian Navy's performance and capabilities since 1901 can be judged but it provides an interesting series of snapshots from which much can be deduced. The RAN of 2010 exists in the shape it has taken and the capacity it continues to display because of the sound planning, effective leadership and determination of those who have gone before, in peace and war and on and off the battlefield. This book is a tribute to those named in it, and to the hundreds of thousands who are not – without whose contribution Australia's navy could not have achieved what it has and what it continues to achieve.